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**CLASS, STRATIFICATION AND BEYOND:  
THE GERMAN CASE**

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In the early eighties — well before the breakdown of the former GDR and the start of the reunification process — a new sociological debate emerged in West Germany about major changes of the social structure (Beck, 1983; Hradil, 1987). Keywords of this debate were for example “individualization”, “pluralization of life styles”, “social milieus” and “new social inequalities”. In general it was stated that the old rigid social structure defined by “large societal groups” has given way to a new, more fluid and individualized social structure. In particular doubts were raised whether traditional concepts like class and social stratification are still appropriate tools for the description and analysis of a changing structure of inequality. For some these changes amounted to an “end of social stratification” while other well known scholars defended the classical approaches.

In the following essay I will summarize this recent debate on the nature of social inequality; but first I will present a general overview over the tradition and of the main topics of research on social stratification and class analysis in German sociology during the past decades. In addition, some of the concepts and classifications frequently used in public statistics and empirical research on social inequality will be discussed. Overall my contribution intends to provide some insights into how the structure of social inequality is perceived and conceptualized in German social science in comparison to other societies<sup>1</sup>.

The subject to be dealt with here is neither social inequality in general nor the numerous empirical studies addressing specific dimensions or topics of inequality like gender inequality, the inequality between generations, regional inequality, income inequality or the inequality of educational opportunities, rather it is limited to concepts of the structuration of inequality<sup>2</sup>.

#### TWO MAJOR CONCEPTS OF STRUCTURED INEQUALITY

Concepts of the structuration of inequality are — not only in German sociology — mainly rooted in two traditions of theory and research: class theory and the theory of social stratification.

With respect to class theory, two important conceptual approaches and traditions can be distinguished: The class theory of Karl Marx on the one side and the class concept of Max Weber on the other. Marx saw capitalist societies divided into two antagonistic classes: the Bourgeoisie as owners of capital or the means of production is seen as the ruling class, disposing of economic as well as political power. The proletariat or working class excluded from possession of the means of production is considered to be the exploited class. Weber developed his class theory in critical reaction to Marx. Whereas classes in the theory of Marx are defined by their relation to the means of production, classes in the notion of Weber are shaped by different market opportunities. Class theories rooted in the Weberian tradition consider the “market position” therefore as being the basis of the differentiation of “Besitzklassen” and “Erwerbsklassen” and the most important determinant of respective life chances of class members.

Concerning the concept of social stratification there are at least two theoretical traditions as well that seem to be particularly influential for inequality research in Germany. One tradition of social stratification theory is closely connected with Theodor Geiger (1932), who used similar living conditions and life chances, but also specific mentalities as the basis for defining and distinguishing social strata. Another tradition of research in social stratification was established by American sociologists like Lloyd Warner as well as others and adopted in Germany. They used social and occupational prestige as the major criterion to distinguish hierarchically ordered social strata.

Whereas the concepts “class” and “strata” are frequently used as equivalents in the American literature, in Germany the distinction between “Klassen” and “Schichten” is significant both in sociology as well as in everyday life. In general it can be said that the term “Schicht” has a more neutral, even affirmative meaning compared to the term “Klasse” which is usually related to a more critical, conflict-oriented perspective of society. In everyday life too the notion of the term “class” is usually associated with its Marxist origin and meaning.

As sociological concepts the differences between class analysis and the analysis of social stratification can be seen in the following characteristics: In relation to stratification analysis class analysis is characterized by (1) a stronger economic orientation, (2) putting more emphasis on conflict and power, (3) a stronger historical orientation and (4) a theoretical orientation, with a higher priority given to explanation rather than description (Geißler, 1992: 62)<sup>3</sup>. In addition it can be said that social stratification denotes primarily a clear cut hierarchical order whereas class systems include hierarchical elements only as one among other dimensions. On the other hand there are numerous different approaches within the field of stratification research: some concepts consider social strata as being based on just one dimension (e.g. occupational prestige) and others employ it as a multidimensional concept; sometimes the identification of different social strata is based on objective variables and sometimes on subjective sentiments.

But aside from the differences there are a number of common characteristics of the two concepts. (1) Most important is perhaps that both concepts consider the system of economic production and peoples position within this system as of particular importance concerning the creation of social inequality (Noll/Habich, 1990: 153). (2) According to each of the concepts members of society can be assigned to groups of similar social conditions and membership in a particular class or stratum is in turn supposed to be correlated with specific life chances. (3) Individuals who belong to the same class or strata are expected to develop a sense of a common identity such as class-consciousness or “Schichtmentalität” (Geißler, 1992: 61f) or even similar patterns of behaviour.

RESEARCH ON CLASSES AND STRATIFICATION: FROM THE EARLY FIFTIES TO THE LATE SEVENTIES

Looking at the course of research on class and social stratification in the Federal Republic of Germany we can identify distinct periods. Here we are going to distinguish between a first period from the early fifties to the mid sixties and a second period reaching from the late sixties to the end of the seventies<sup>4</sup>. As indicated, at the beginning of the eighties the discussion turned to more fundamental questions – to be dealt with in the next section – whether modern societies are still structured by classes or social strata and whether respective theories and methodological approaches are still useful tools for the analysis of contemporary societies.

*The Fifties and Sixties: A Golden Age of Stratification Research*

The first period, from the early fifties to the mid sixties, was much more influenced by the stratification approach rather than by class analysis and saw mainly three types of theoretical discussions and research activities:

- debates on trends of stratification,
- studies on specific classes or status groups,
- constructing and quantifying models of social stratification.

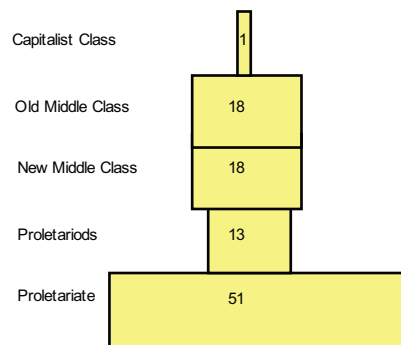
*Debates on trends of social stratification:* Controversies concerning the “real” shape and the main trends of social stratification can be traced back to the early fifties. The studies of Theodor Geiger (1949) and Helmut Schelsky (1965) that both received major attention, share the view that boundaries between classes are at times weak and even declining over time. In his book “Klassengesellschaft im Schmelztiegel” (“class society in the melting pot”) Geiger argued that the traditional class society is melting away and that the structure of social stratification on the other hand is becoming more complex and differentiated. Schelsky used the label “nivellierte Mittelstandsgesellschaft” (“outleveled middle class society”) to characterize the far reaching changes he saw in the structure of social inequality of the postwar German society. According to his observations, processes of collective upgrading and downgrading had leveled former distinctions between classes and social strata to a large degree (Geißler, 1992: 64f). As a result, Schelsky saw the appearance of a growing and dominating middle class characterized by “equal political rights, similar material living conditions and a far

reaching equality of opportunities” (Geißler, 1992: 64; author’s translation). Schelsky’s view of a more egalitarian and destratified German society had a major impact on the public debate in subsequent years but was also subject of extended criticism.

*Studies on specific classes or status groups:* A second type of research — just to be mentioned here — are studies on specific classes or status groups. Examples are “Die Angestellten” (“white collar employees”) by Braun (1964) or “Das Gesellschaftsbild des Arbeiters” (“workers image of society”) by Popitz and others (1957). These studies dealt with the changing status of major societal groups directly linked to positions in the class structure or stratification system and their view of and participation in the new German society. The study by Popitz and others for example came to the result, that workers in contrast to other status groups typically had a dichotomized view of society seeing some groups at the top and others at the bottom.

*Constructing and quantifying models of social stratification:* During the fifties and sixties a great deal of research in this field was dedicated to the construction of models of the stratification system and attempts to estimate the size of the status groups included. Some important examples are the 4-class-model by M. Janowitz (1958), based on self identification, the “image-approach” by H. Moore and G. Kleining (1959) or the stratification-index developed by E.K. Scheuch (1961), based on a combination of occupational status, economic situation and cultural level.

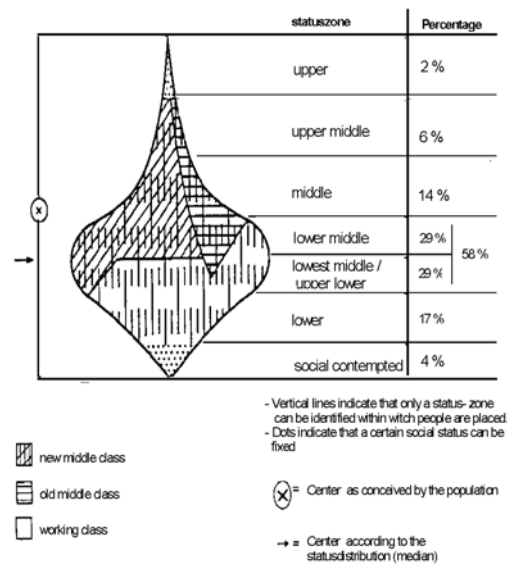
*Chart 1: Social Stratification of German People - Republic of Weimar:  
Theodor Geiger 1932*



One of the most influential and important approaches was that by Th. Geiger (1932), developed already in the prewar period. Geiger considered social strata as real social groups defined by a similar level of living and a common mentality. In his description of the social stratification of the German people of the Republic of Weimar, Geiger distinguished five “classes”: the capitalist class, the old middle class, a new middle class, the proletaroids and the proletariat (chart 1).

Another approach to describe the system of social stratification of the postwar German society is that by Bolte *et. al.* (1967). In their view the stratification system of the sixties had already changed from a pyramid-like to an onion-shaped structure: the majority of the population belonged to the middle classes, while the lower as well as the upper classes are seen as minorities at the margins. The model contains all together seven strata reaching from the “socially contempted” at the bottom to the “upper class” at the top (chart 2). The authors came however to the conclusion, that the boundaries between these strata are not clear cut, at least not in the middle part of the hierarchy. The data used to build up this model are those available at the time at a societal level, mainly those collected by Moore/Kleining (1959) and Scheuch (1961).

Chart 2: Social Stratification of German People - 1960s

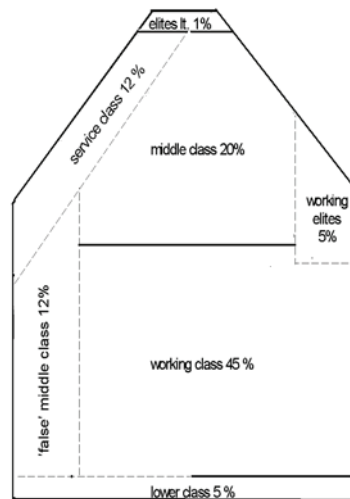


Source: Boite/Kappe/Neidhardt 1967: 316 (author's translation)

A third important and influential model of social stratification of the German society is that presented by Ralf Dahrendorf in the mid sixties (Dahrendorf 1965). Dahrendorf criticized theories of classlessness or the end of social stratification — particularly Schelsky's theory of an “outleveled middle class society” — as being ideological and representing a typically German aversion against the idea of inequality and conflict (1965: 144 ff)<sup>5</sup>. For Dahrendorf social stratification existed without any doubts as one of the solid facts of modern as well as any other society<sup>6</sup>. According to Dahrendorf two kinds of inequality are to be distinguished: Productive inequality is considered to be a source of social conflict and strongly connected to classes, resulting from the unequal distribution of power. Social stratification on the other hand denotes the system of distributive inequality, related to the distribution of income, prestige, education and sometimes also power. From this point of view however, contemporary stratification models like those developed by

Janowitz, Moore/Kleining and Scheuch – because of the variety of different results offered by them – gave reason to assume, that the boundaries between social strata sometimes seem to be rather imprecise. Such models therefore seemed to be of limited usefulness for a description and analysis of societal reality. Dahrendorf's own proposals follow the tradition of Geiger. His house shaped picture of the social stratification in Germany is based on a method of “informed estimation” (Dahrendorf 1965: 104ff).

*Chart 3: Social Stratification of German People - 1960s*



*Source:* Dahrendorf 1965: 105

The distinctions compared to Geiger's model reflect important changes in postwar German society, particularly progress in differentiation. In addition, Dahrendorf emphasizes socio-political and socio-cultural dimensions more than socio-economic dimensions. At first glance Dahrendorf's house consists of seven rooms or parts. However he points out that there are also corners and alcoves within each room, which

makes the whole structure more complicated. Also walls are sometimes movable or even permeable. Overall this model of social stratification obviously has a strong appeal, although it was of little consequence for empirical research. One of its advantages certainly is the importance it gave to the — by that time — rather new service class, a concept which some years later gained much prominence in the class scheme developed by Goldthorpe (1982).

*The Late Sixties and Seventies: A Revival of Class Analysis*

The late sixties and early seventies saw a renaissance of class analysis in the Marxian tradition. An attempt was made, to describe the social structure of the German society on an empirical basis, which was compatible with Marx' class theory and his forecasts concerning the developmental dynamics of capitalist societies<sup>7</sup>. German society was considered to be a class society and not a stratified society. Tjaden-Steinhauer and Tjaden (1973) for example came to the result that in 1970, 83 % of the German labour force belonged to the working class, 2 % to the capitalist class and 15 % to semicapitalist groups. Despite these findings, a crucial question of Marxist class analysis by that time was how to deal with the middle classes. Two other major projects of Marxist class analysis identified groups like the “intelligentsia” or salaried management personnel belonging to the middle class (Autorenkollektiv 1974; Projekt Klassenanalyse 1974), nonetheless the majority of about 75% of the labour force was classified as part of the working class. These approaches therefore failed to take into account the increased complexity of modern capitalist societies. If there was any gain from this episode of neomarxist class analysis it was its contribution to sharpen again the view for the importance of inequality in social analysis in general (Geißler, 1992: 66).

From today's view much more important than this episode of neomarxist class analysis was a by that time new kind of research, following more or less the tradition of Weberian class analysis and attempting to present a more differentiated picture of the class structure and social mobility patterns using large scale empirical datasets. The microanalytical studies by J. Handl, K.-U. Mayer and W. Müller (1977) using a large survey on social mobility conducted by the German Federal Statistical Office as part of its “Microcensus” turned out to be major steps to accomplish these goals. As elsewhere, status-attainment-research in the tradition of Blau/Duncan's (1967) “The American Occupational

Structure” played an important role by that time (Müller 1975). Research in this tradition was mainly focused on the “political goal of equality of opportunity” (Kurz/Müller, 1987: 417). However, major contributions were also made towards the analysis of intergenerational social mobility and the socioeconomic structure of the population or to the question of homogamy (Mayer 1977a; 1977b).

The late seventies saw a revitalization of the class concept; the so called Goldthorpe-approach of class analysis became more and more popular as well as E.O. Wright's approach was followed by some scholars (Holtmann/Strasser 1990). On the one hand this kind of research focused “on the implications of mobility for class consciousness and class formation” (Kurz/Müller 1987: 418) and on the other the by this time much more sophisticated class-schemes — as developed by Goldthorpe and others — were used to study changes of social mobility over time and in international comparison<sup>8</sup>. In a study of social mobility patterns in the Federal Republic of Germany, in comparison to other highly developed industrial countries, Walter Müller (1986) came to the result that the German “mobility regime” produces a comparatively high degree of immobility and that the opportunity structure is more differentiated and less equal than that of the United States and Sweden, for example.

#### CLASS AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION: SELECTED CONCEPTS AND CLASSIFICATIONS IN SOCIAL STATISTICS AND EMPIRICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

In the following section selected concepts and classifications used to measure and describe the class structure or social stratification in Germany by social statistics and empirical social research are presented and discussed. This part of the essay is based on the assumption that cross-cultural differences in the institutional background of social inequality as well as in the structure of inequality and in the approaches of dealing with it do manifest themselves in different classifications and concepts of measurement.

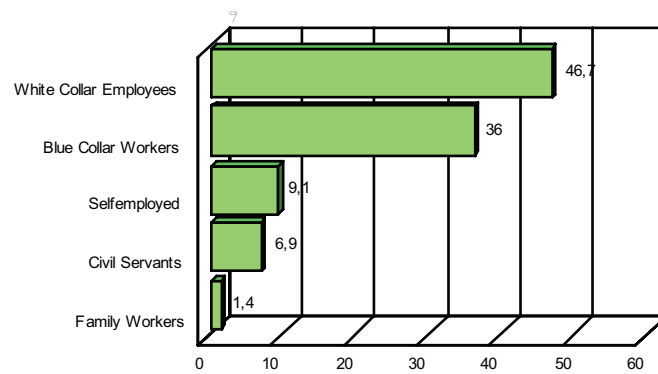
##### *The Concept of “Stellung im Beruf” - Occupational Status*

In German public statistics as well as empirical social research, the concept of “Stellung im Beruf” (occupational status) is of central importance as far as any measurement and classification of occupational status positions is concerned. The distinction between “Arbeitern” (blue collar workers), “Angestellten” (white collar employees) and “Beamten”

(civil servants) has its institutional background in the German social security system. The pension system — for example — is subdivided into the “Bundesversicherungsanstalt für Angestellte” (federal old age insurance for white collar employees) and several “Landesversicherungsanstalten” (state-based old age insurance agencies) for blue collar workers. The pension of civil servants is the direct responsibility of the state. Belonging to the status groups of either “Arbeitern” or “Angestellten” or “Beamten” therefore is accompanied by a whole range of differences not only in the type of job, job content, payment and job security, but also in social security regulations and respective entitlements.

The basic classification of “Stellung im Beruf” used by official statistics usually includes the following five status groups: “Arbeiter” (blue collar workers), “Angestellte” (white collar employees), “Beamte” (civil servants), “Selbständige” (self employed) and “mithelfende Familienangehörige” (family workers). The following chart shows the distribution of employed persons by their respective occupational status in 1994 according to the results of the “microcensus”.

Chart 4: Employed Persons by Occupational Status (Stellung im Beruf)  
West-Germany 1994 (%)



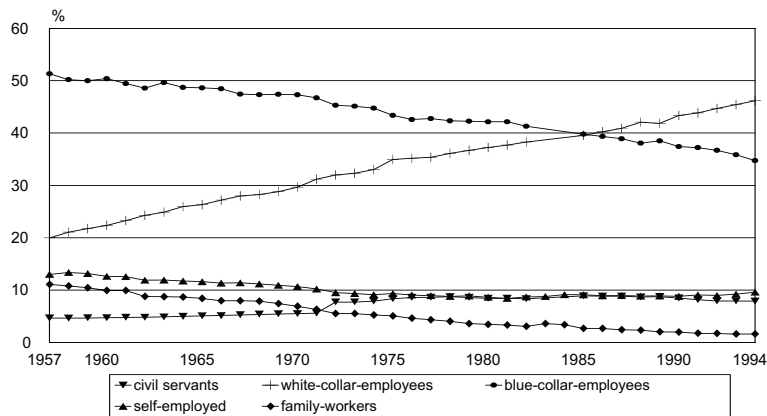
Source: Statistisches Bundesamt

From chart 5 it can be seen, how the employment structure according to these status groups changed over time. Whereas the proportion of blue collar workers still exceeded 50 % in the late fifties, it went down to less than 40 % in the early nineties. Respectively the proportion of white collar employees increased from about 20 % in 1957 to almost 50 % in

1992. We also observe a decline in the percentage of the self employed and family workers as well as a small increase in the proportion of civil servants.

This concept of “Stellung im Beruf” is not only used to classify employed persons, but also to classify unemployed persons or people outside the labour force especially family members. In this case people are usually grouped according to their earlier occupational status or according to the status of the “head of household”.

Chart 5: *Employed Persons by Occupational Status (Stellung im Beruf)*  
West — Germany 1957 -1994



Database: System of Social Indicators

The concept of “Stellung im Beruf” is frequently used in empirical social research as well. It belongs to the standard variables included in almost each sample survey. In survey research however the concept sometimes is used in a more differentiated form. Within the large status groups of dependent employees (blue collar workers, white collar employees and civil servants) a distinction is made according to qualification and position in job hierarchy. The self employed are sometimes classified in more detail according to type of business, number of employees or — in case of farmers — size of property.

*Goldthorpe-Classification*

As mentioned earlier, the Goldthorpe approach became more and more popular in research on social mobility and social inequality since the late seventies. It has been adapted to the German situation by W. Müller. Today the so called Goldthorpe classification is included in some major social surveys as a standard variable and can easily be used for respective analyses<sup>9</sup>. This classification is not directly used as a question in the questionnaires of respective surveys, but constructed on the basis of other variables, in particular the “Stellung im Beruf” and the “International Standard Classification of Occupations”<sup>10</sup>. In its standard format the Goldthorpe classification includes 7 to 10 classes:

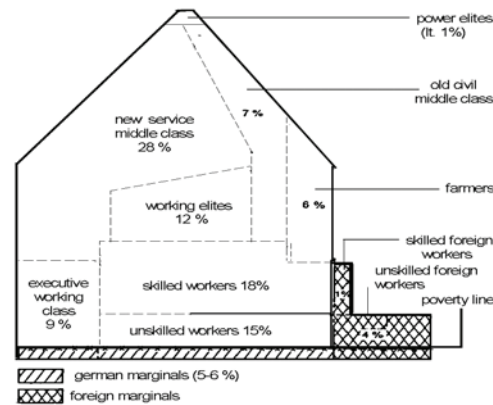
*Table 1: Categories of the Goldthorpe - Class-Scheme and Distribution of Employed Population 1993*

	West-Germany	East-Germany
	%	%
Upper Service Class	14	14
Lower Service Class	25	20
Petty Bourgeoisie	8	6
Routine Non Manual Employees	11	12
Blue Collar Elite	13	8
Working Class: Skilled Manual Wage-Workers	18	30
Working Class: Semi-Unskilled Wage Workers	11	10

*Database: Wohlfahrtssurvey 1993*

Meanwhile the Goldthorpe classification has been used in numerous studies of social inequality and social mobility in Germany. Although its advantages are more in analytic than in descriptive studies, for the 1980s the following picture of the structure of social stratification in West-Germany has been put together, following Dahrendorf's idea of a house-shaped structure and using the empirical distribution over the categories of the Goldthorpe classification:

Chart 6: Social Stratification of West German People — 1980s



Source: Geißler, 1992; Noll/Habich, 1990.

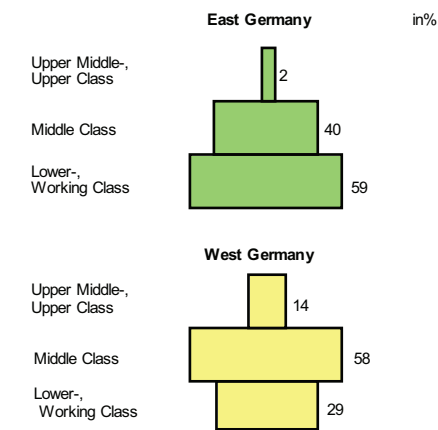
The main changes of this “house” compared to the one described by Dahrendorf are in quantitative terms the following: (1) a drastical growth of the service classes, (2) a decline of the ‘old’ middle class, (3) a decline of the working class, but an increase of the workers elite, and last but not least (4) a new wing added to the basement, where foreign workers and the poor moved in. But according to Geißler there are qualitative changes as well: First of all, the simple dwelling house of the sixties has changed to a luxury apartment residence. Apart from some corners, even the basement has become more comfortable. Moreover ceilings and walls have become more permeable than they already used to be. The floors and rooms of the residency are no longer strictly compartmented by fixed ceilings and walls; instead partly open floors and movable walls allow for more flexibility and permeability. Hence this house in the postmodern architecture of the nineties offers more opportunities for an open style of living than the dwelling house of the sixties did (Geißler, 1996a: 85-87).

*Subjective Class Identification*

“Subjective class identification” is another frequently used variable in German survey research. The tradition of this kind of measurement of social inequality can be traced back to the studies of the American psychologist Richard Centers and has been used in Germany the first time by Janowitz (1958) and Moore/Kleining (1959). Subjective class identification first of all indicates where people see their own position within the hierarchical structure of a society, to which social milieu they think they belong to, and from which point of view they look at society and participate in social life.

Wording of respective survey questions is usually — with some variation — similar to the following question from the “German Welfare Survey”: “Today there is much talk about social classes. To which class do you belong to: the working class, the middle class, the upper middle class, the upper class?”. Additional categories are in this case: “none of these classes”, “don’t know”, “classification rejected”. Chart 7 shows the distribution of subjective class identification for West- and East-Germany in comparison:

Chart 7: Subjective Class Identification - Germany 1993



Database: Wohlfahrtssurvey

In the western part of Germany 29 % of the adult population see their own position as being in the working class, 58 % as being in the middle class, and 14 % as being in the upper-middle or upper classes. For the new German states we observe a very different distribution: 59 % identify themselves with working class, 40 % with middle class and only a tiny minority of 2 % with upper middle or upper class. Only a small percentage of about 2 % did not identify themselves with any of these classes.

Since correlation between subjective class identification and socioeconomic status or objective class variables turns out to be rather strong, subjective class identification is frequently used in survey research as an indicator of class position.

#### A NEW STRUCTURE OF INEQUALITY OR BEYOND CLASS AND STRATIFICATION?

While much of the discussion of the seventies still centered around the “old” topic of class structure versus social stratification, at the beginning of the eighties a rather “new” debate emerged, which put the up to then generally accepted view of a society, in which social inequality is structured by either social classes or social strata more radically into question. The main subject of controversial discussion now became the question whether social classes and/or social strata are dying and whether a new structure of inequality is emerging in modern societies. Although similar controversies took place in other societies too (Clark/Lipset, 1991; Hout *et. al.*, 1993; Pakulski/Waters, 1996), the German discussion seems to be particularly pronounced and radical (Geißler, 1996b: 324).

With respect to the general topic of the structure of inequality, two lines of research and theoretical controversies can be distinguished:

##### *Two-thirds-society*

The debate on the “two-thirds-society” arose in the early eighties and is still popular, particularly in political discourse in order to criticize the existing distribution of income and wealth. From this perspective the modernization of our societies is accompanied by rising inequality and processes of increasing polarization and segmentation. The observation of a “new poverty” and growing “isles of poverty” within the rich societies of the western world used to be the empirical basis for the thesis of a two-thirds-society<sup>11</sup>, which is characterized by the fact, that a considerable minority of about one third of the population does not

participate in prosperity and improving living conditions, while the majority of two thirds is living in continuously growing affluence. The view that not everybody is profiting from modernization in the same way, that there are winners as well as losers, is still of importance — for example in order to explain votes for right wing parties — even if the existence of a two-thirds-society - at least in this proportions — empirically has not been proved<sup>12</sup>.

The fact that this at least politically rather important discussion of the two-thirds-society makes almost no use of the theory and terminology of class analysis or the social stratification approach, seems to have some significance as far as it indicates that there is a view of the structure of inequality, which is different and independent from the traditional perspective of a stratified or class society.

*End of class and stratification?*

Compared to the rather politicized discussion of a two-thirds-society, the end of class and stratification debate is of eminent theoretical importance. It deals with the question, whether class analysis and social stratification research are still appropriate and useful tools for the study of inequality in our modern societies. Two basic concepts of sociological analysis are critically examined<sup>13</sup>. The debate is rather controversial, there are critics as well as defenders of the classical approach<sup>14</sup>.

The main arguments of the critique of the traditional view that propagates the thesis of the end of class and stratification are the following<sup>15</sup>:

- Due to a general upgrading of the level of living<sup>16</sup> — as for example manifested in income, consumption, education, free time, length of life, inequality has lost much of its earlier social meaning, although inequality distributions in terms of differences between status groups have remained remarkably stable. However, on a higher level of living the differences are less significant than they used to be on a lower level.
- As a result of the development of modern welfare state institutions and the considerable amount of transfer payments the individual level of living is less depending on people's occupational position and their employment income and status (Lepsius, 1979; Zapf, 1981).
- Demarcation lines between classes or strata are becoming less and less visible, impermeable and meaningful in everyday life.

- The risks and threats of modern high-technology societies such as environmental pollution, nuclear contamination and even unemployment - do not respect the traditional borders between social classes and strata<sup>17</sup>. The distribution of such risks follows different rules.
- “New” inequalities such as gender inequality, inequality between generations, ethnic inequalities and regional disparities have gained in significance and are now much more important than the “old” inequalities between classes and social strata. The structure of inequality is more complex and differentiated than the traditional view of class and social stratification theory suggests.
- Individual life styles are less and less determined by the affiliation to social classes or strata. Social milieus characterized by class specific attitudes and behaviour are vanishing. Instead rising economic potentials as well as social options have given way to a pluralization and individualization of life styles. Accordingly concepts such as “life style” and “social milieu” are considered to be the more appropriate tools or “key terms” of a realistic analysis of the social structure of modern societies (Hörning/Michailow, 1990).
- According to other observers “knowledge” has gained in significance as a principle of social stratification, but at the same time it is stated that knowledge related structures of social stratification are less definitive and clear cut (Stehr 1994).

From this critical point of view a trend towards a de-stratification of inequality is identified. In summary the message is: there is still inequality, but without stratification and classes have turned to pure classifications without any equivalent in reality.

This point of view is far from being undisputed. While the observation of a weakening of class boundaries and the deterministic power of class position is rather uncontroversial, another group of scholars share the view that inequality still has a strong vertical dimension and is structured by social classes or strata. Among the main arguments defending the traditional concepts of class and stratification against their critics are the following<sup>18</sup>:

- The position in the economic system of production is still a dominating principle of the structuration of inequality, although it is not the only one.
- The affiliation to different social classes or strata is still clearly correlated with the level of living and specific life chances as well as

value orientations and attitudes. Class and stratification variables therefore still show explanatory power in social analysis.

- There is empirical evidence, that the rigidity of social inequality in terms of class and stratification has not diminished, but in some respects even increased. Mayer and Blossfeld (1990) report for example increasing correlations between educational attainment and social origin in subsequent age cohorts.
- The so called “new inequalities” are by no means new. It is only the attention of social scientists and the public which has changed.
- Concepts of class and stratification are considered to be models of reality and not as describing reality in itself. Clear cut social classes characterized by a pronounced class-consciousness and subcultural identities hardly ever existed after the Second world war. But the same is true for the new concepts of “life style” or “social milieu”, which also have to be considered as models of reality and do not describe social reality as such.

In summary, the message of the defenders of the classical approach is such that tendencies of de-stratification and destructurement of inequality are largely overestimated and the concepts of class and stratification — with some qualifications — are still needed as useful tools of the analysis of social inequality. The more and more popular notion that classes and social strata are dissolving as a consequence of modernization has been contested heavily. Moreover the “ideological implications” of the new approach of an analysis of social inequality beyond class and stratification have been emphasized (Geißler, 1996b: 322 ff.): Following the new approach, research on inequality tends to be replaced by research on variety. It is no more the inequality of living conditions as an important political issue, which research focuses on, but the variety of living arrangements, life styles and behaviour — topics which are much less subject of political attention and action.

As yet there is no final outcome of the debate in favour of the one or the other approach. The discussion between the two positions is still going on. However some kind of an approximation of the two views seems to have happened. On the one hand some of the critics of class theory and the social stratification approach have weakened their position somewhat by saying, that the individualized society is not yet reality, but only a trend just covering certain parts of the whole population (Beck/Beck-Gernsheim, 1994: 16). Moreover it has been stated that it is

most likely that societies differ in the degree to which class positions are still structuring social inequality and class differences as well as class-sentiments are present in everyday life (Beck 1986: 121). On the other hand the defenders of the classical approach of the analysis of the structure of inequality agree with the notion, that class position and stratification have lost some importance compared to other dimensions of inequality. The view that there is a trend towards a more differentiated, more pluralistic and individualized social structure which provides people with more options and possibilities of choice is almost generally shared. Accordingly from this point of view it is suggested to consider modern societies as characterized by a vertical, but more dynamic and pluralistic structure of inequality, where classes and social strata still have their place (Geißler, 1996b: 331 ff.).

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

During the last decade one of the major debates in German sociology centered around the role of the basic concepts of “class” and “social stratification” in current and future research on social inequality and social structure. While up to the late seventies or even the early eighties it was quite obvious, that macro-sociological analysis had to deal with classes and/or social stratification (Herz, 1983: 11) the role of these concepts has been fundamentally put into question more recently. Are social classes dying and are the highly industrialized modern western societies no more hierarchically structured by socioeconomic strata as they used to be? Are there new structures of social inequality emerging and will it be necessary to replace the “old” concepts of “class” and “stratification” by “new” ones like “life style” and “social milieu”? The German debate has not come to a final result as yet. There is at least some evidence that compared to other principles of the structuration of inequality the socio-economic status became less dominating. On the other hand it seems as if scepticism against the classical concepts of class and social stratification in Germany is more pronounced than in other societies. What therefore is needed to give a more substantial answer to the question whether there is a new structure of social inequality are comparative studies and a discussion from an international point of view.

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## NOTES

- [1] I would like to thank Walter Müller (University of Mannheim), Nico Stehr (University of British Columbia, Vancouver) as well as my colleagues from the international research group "Comparative Charting of Social Change" for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article.
- [2] This article does not cover respective contributions and discussion in sociology of the former GDR. As a manifestation of the analysis of classes and stratification in socialist societies see for example Lötsch and Mayer (1974). Also differences in the equality of opportunities as well as income and wealth between the "old" and "new" German states, which have been subject of numerous studies after German reunification, are out of the scope of this article.
- [3] Of course there are many more differences between the two concepts, which can not be discussed in detail here. For a more comprehensive discussion of differences and similarities between the concepts of class and social stratification see for example Hradil (1987).
- [4] For more detailed and comprehensive reviews of research on theory and research on social stratification in German sociology during the fifties, sixties and seventies see Erhard R. Wiehn (1975) and T.A. Herz (1983).
- [5] Interesting enough, in Dahrendorf's (1965) review of Schelsky there are many parallels to the contemporary "End of stratification" debate, as there are some striking similarities between Beck's main arguments in his article "Beyond Class and Stratification" (1983) and Schelsky's theory of an "Outleveled Middle Class Society" (1965).

- [6] "Kurzum, es gibt soziale Schichtung; sie ist eine harte Tatsache der modernen wie jeder anderen Gesellschaft" (Dahrendorf 1965: 96).
- [7] For a discussion of these approaches see Handl/Mayer/Müller (1977).
- [8] A prominent example is the CASMIN-Project (Comparative Analysis of Social Mobility in Industrial Nations), directed by R. Erikson, J. H. Goldthorpe and W. Müller.
- [9] Cf. for example the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) or the German Welfare Survey (see table 1).
- [10] For a detailed description and discussion of the German version of the Goldthorpe-Class-Scheme see K. Kurz (1985).
- [11] The discussion on the "Two-thirds-society" has been quite stimulating for empirical poverty research in Germany. During the last ten years or so a multitude of books and articles on this topic have been published, many of them using longitudinal data sets and much more sophisticated methods of analysis than in the past.
- [12] See for example Headey/Krause/Habich (1994: 1): "Germany appears to be a 75-15-10 society: 75% not poor, 15% occasionally poor but with generally adequate incomes, and 10% frequently poor or near-poor with incomes that may be considered inadequate".
- [13] Within this debate however, the two concepts are usually seen as only slightly different variations of the one "hierarchical paradigm" of social inequality.
- [14] Some of the numerous contributions to the debate are documented within the volumes edited by Kreckel (1983) and Berger/Hradil (1990). Overviews from different points of view are — for example — given by Berger/Hradil (1990) and Geißler (1992, 1996a, 1996b).
- [15] See among others Beck (1983), Berger (1987), Hradil (1987), Kreckel (1987).
- [16] Beck (1986: 122) used the metaphor of an elevator, which had carried the class-society to a higher floor in order to characterize a major change in the social structure of the West German society.
- [17] See Beck (1986: 48): "Nicht ist hierarchisch, Smog ist demokratisch. In diesem Sinne sind Risikogesellschaften gerade keine Klassengesellschaften; ihre Gefährdungslagen lassen sich nicht als Klassenlagen begreifen, ihre Konflikte nicht als Klassenkonflikte".
- [18] See among others Geißler (1990; 1992), Haller (1986), Mayer (1987), Müller (1986), Strasser (1987), Noll/Habich (1990).